



South Africa's NSC is more than fit for purpose and is globally recognised

Over the past few years, a number of educational institutions operating in South Africa have taken to punting the benefits of an “international” qualification or education juxtaposed against the National Senior Certificate (NSC) and CAPS curriculum. The claims play to the flawed perceptions of many South Africans who believe that if anything is international and not local, it must be superior. This exploitation of the insecurities of parents and learners exposes an incomplete understanding of the South African educational order, and the quality and standing of SA's NSC both locally and internationally.

There appears to be a number of misperceptions around “international” school-leaving qualifications offered in South Africa and the NSC, that warrant unpacking and better understanding:

- **The first is the repeated inference that an “international” curriculum is superior to the local, national curriculum and school-leaving qualification (NSC) must be questioned.**

In 2010, the IEB undertook a benchmarking exercise of the NSC through UK NARIC, the UK equivalent of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). In that report, available on the IEB website, the Naric Benchmarking Analysis of the NSC found the qualification both robust and fit for the purposes of examining senior secondary school levels. In terms of the qualification's comparability, the report concluded that the National Senior Certificate at Grade 12 is broadly comparable to the GCE AS-level. For those candidates who undertake the IEB Advanced Programme in Mathematics, the report is satisfied that the additional content is more reflective of the requirements of the GCE A level. (Benchmarking Analysis: The National Senior Certificate (Republic of South Africa, March 2010)

The reality is that the NSC is not only recognised by all South African universities, but also by a substantial number of top universities across the globe. If the NSC is offered in conjunction with the Advanced Programme courses which are assessed by the IEB but open to all Southern African schools (public and independent), it opens doors to even the most prestigious universities across the globe. Students offering the NSC together with the Advanced Programme courses have as much chance of getting into top universities in Europe, the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the UK, as someone holding an international qualification. If learners can include a high score from the SATs examinations from the US to their list of achievements, they open every door possible. Selection then depends on a range of factors outside the academic prowess of the learner or the educational record of the assessment body. What is important is that learners who write the NSC – whether through the state or the IEB – are recognised because the qualification is internationally recognised.

- **The second is the implication that an “international” curriculum is more innovative and attuned to preparing learners for the 4th Industrial revolution.**

A scan of the websites of good schools, both public and independent, indicates that they actively teach and promote the use of technology and computers as well as develop the accompanying skills. All South African curriculum documents underline the importance of preparing learners to take their place in the 4th Industrialised world that we live in. In fact, every school or assessment body that wishes to be known as a premier educational institution acknowledges, emphasises and accommodates opportunities to expose and develop the fundamental skills that underpin an academic education experience: understanding how knowledge is created through the research process, reasoning, problem-solving, critically engaging with concepts, alternate opinions and attitudes and of course communication in all its facets. These claims are certainly not unique to “international” organisations. The critical issue is the extent to which what happens in a school, inside and outside the classroom, supported by the curriculum and assessment, fulfils the commitment to learners that is made by the school and its associated assessment body.

- **The third implication is that “international” is intended to mean that the educational experience, teaching, teacher training and resources are better.**

Every assessment body in the world including state and independent bodies, in addition to providing a curriculum and a set of examinations, provides teacher training and support in its particular philosophy of education as well as teaching and assessment resources.

There have been a number of articles published that mention outstanding performances of learners in various international qualifications offered locally. One article from 2018 in particular mentioned the names of schools from which a number of the prestigious performers came from. Many of the schools mentioned had only commenced with the offering of the international qualification from as recently as 2016, while others offer only the final two or three years of secondary education through an international qualification. It will be difficult to explain to any person who works in education that the academic success of these learners has been achieved through following the international qualification’s curriculum for just two years of schooling.

The key point is that these learners have been educated in South Africa using our own local curriculum, taught by teachers who have been educated and are working in this country; these students owe their academic ability and prowess to the roots and foundations established in the South African context – the South African curriculum, the South African trained teachers, the South African schools, resourced in many cases by the South African taxpayer.

Schools have a constitutional right to choose an assessment body of their choice along with its associated curriculum that aligns with the values and aspirations of the learners and parents. What is crucial, is that parents and teachers should not be naively led to believe that because something has an “international” label to it, it must be better, can open more doors or a provide a more rewarding learning experience.

South Africa is country of contrasts, of diversity, a rich sociological phenomenon that provides an ideal context for valuable learning about the world we live in and the skills we need to become a success. If you doubt this for one minute – think why is it that developed countries across the world advertise in South Africa for teachers, nurses, doctors, engineers, electricians, IT professionals, plumbers and technicians? Why, if they have these seemingly more sophisticated educational systems and qualifications at their disposal, do they recruit here? I would suggest that it is because they recognise the worth of our people. The increasing rate of emigration of South Africans across the cultural spectrum has come about for a number of reasons, not least of which is an appreciation by developed countries of the initiative and ability of skilled and educated South Africans.

When it comes to good education in both independent and state institutions, do not be fooled – “Local is lekker”. The reality is that worthwhile value-based education is the domain of good teachers who may find one or other curriculum or assessment process helpful in their work. Outstanding, committed teachers certainly exist in our schools – our independent schools, our state schools, in our rural schools, in our township schools – a quality education is not a necessary outcome of expensive educational programs but rather, an outcome from a competent committed teaching body, students who are keen to learn and a strong parental support system to encourage and motivate them to do the best they can.